Sept. 27. 1891

and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul. acts 4. 32

Having just returned from the 14th Session of the National Unitarian Conference. I take this occasion, while the impressions there gained are fresh in my mind, to speak to you concerning the Unitarian outlook. This individual Church, let us always remember, is bound by no ecclesiastical authority or association, and is not committed by its form of organization to any sectarian or party name. This is not a Unitarian Church, in the same sense that other churches are, Methodist or Presbyterian, or ~~Baptist~~ Episcopalian Churches. It is simply a Congregational Church: holding its character and its future in its own hands. We are an entirely independent company;

for it and think, and worship God
exactly as we please, without consulting any
synod or convention that must beneath the
sun.— But while as a religious organization
we have this perfect autonomy, which none
can take away from us, we are at present in
sympathy and cooperation with a purely
voluntary fellowship of churches that has
come to be called Unitarian. And we are
interested in the character and welfare of that
fellowship; more deeply interested perhaps than
we yet realize.— However jealously we
may guard our rights, in this world we
can only find full life and opportunity
~~when~~ through the help of these general
organizations which put us into touch
with humanity and the world.— While
we are not responsible for, or bound by

anything that the National Unitarian conference may do. yet we are vitally interested in the spiritual life of ~~the~~ The circle of churches which that conference represents. — We need to know well, at least its leading spirit, and whither its true course leads, that we may get the help of its strength, and prevent ourselves from falling beneath the power of its accidental limitations. —

Let us have one glance of retrospect, to provide ourselves with a background against which to place ~~the~~ such impressions as the hour will enable us to sketch. — Whoever ~~has~~ tries to conceive the Unitarian movement apart from the general life of the time, or thinks that it had its origin in any mere difference of speculative opinion concerning the dogmas of the Church, does not understand it. This movement began in religion, precisely

as new movements were begun in Astronomy and geology, with the cry, "Let us get a closer view of the facts of the case, to see what the facts may teach." - That same approach to intellectual maturity which made one circle of minds dissatisfied with old explanations of the physical Universe ~~that~~ did not explain, and drove them to closer study of the outward world to seek a deeper knowledge of its laws, made another circle of minds dissatisfied with current religious theories, and sent them out in search of ~~the~~ closer knowledge of the things of the spirit. - It was no attempt to put one preconceived dogma in place of another preconceived dogma, but the beginning of a more close and intelligent searching of the facts of man's spiritual life; and that investigation once begun, in the nature of the case there was no stopping it, till it had carried its

doubts and its questionings over the whole field.-- The first great fact which this movement discovered was that the dogma of the Trinity is not directly taught, or indeed taught at all, except by remote and evoked implication, in those Scriptures to which all parties then made their common appeal. Certain proof texts were found to be spurious, and have since been universally abandoned by all Christian Scholarship. The announcement of this discovery evoked such another storm of prejudice, as that which greeted Galileo and his new astronomy. Men who did not know sat in judgement upon those who did. Ignorance will not tamely submit to see the foundations of its mobility removed; and though the fires of martyrdom were quenched, these new troublers of the world's peace were forced outside the pale of orthodox believers and

made to wear this brand of heretics. — The controversy over this first result of the higher intellectual life applied to the study of religious certainties gave the Unitarian movement its name. Like most such names the name "Unitarian" is fortuitous and very imperfectly describes, or even hints, the character of this life to which it is applied.

And this brings me to the first definite impression of this life of our churches, that I wish to state. Though, beyond our borders, the name, Unitarian, has a sectarian sound and is taken to be a sectarian badge. Yet within our own ranks, I am convinced it is almost entirely free from such implication and significance. That is to say, though there are undoubtedly bigoted and sectarian Unitarians, as a body we have no peculiar set of doctrines which we wish

impose upon the world, and we do not ~~wish~~
desire to have all mankind see the truth with
our eyes. - We only want that men should see
with eyes, and hear with ears; not that they
should accept on the warrant of tradition
things which have to them no reality and
no vital meaning. The old Sabbinical controversies
of the past, may be fairly said to be with
us absolutely dead. - To be sure late comers
to our ranks have not always heard, ~~as~~ or
are not quite ready to credit this ~~Decease~~ decease. -
But whatever echoes of these conflicts may
still be heard, they are like the few fireworks
left over till the day after the celebration. The
great body of our people have altogether lost
interest in them, and have gone on to
something much more important. Only on
one point, to be presently noted, have we
anything like a controversy with the orthodox

words.- ~~For do not~~ We see that the great ideas of christian history, however poorly defined and expressed in the creeds of the church mean something; We have no quarrel with these ideas. We have even ~~no~~ no particular ~~less~~ quarrel with the ~~partial~~ partial and inadequate statements of these ideas held by the world ~~that was opposed a~~ long ~~little time ago~~. We only insist that men should see with their own intelligence, and feel with their own hearts whatever truth they profess to hold;

~~Idea~~ for so only can religion be saved from the abuses and impostures that poison its life-giving currents.- A doctrine like that of the atonement, for instance, is, in some sort, a symbolic representation of the deep truth, not only that vicarious suffering exists, but that it is everywhere helping to redeem the world from sin and wrong. We wish that men should see and feel this truth, as one of the facts ~~which~~ of life which

they have to reckon with, as surely as they reckon with the laws of physical health: not as if the sacrifice of Christ were any mere ceremony of formal ~~initiation~~ initiation into the Kingdom of heaven, conceived in this latter way we cannot imagine that the doctrine should be really important to anybody, and we perceive that it may be the source of serious corruptions. There is without doubt a deep spiritual and philosophic ~~truth~~ truth at the basis of the dogma of the Trinity, and though we cannot abandon our first contention that the dogma, as held by the Church, is nowhere taught in the Bible, ~~by the Church~~ being almost wholly an outgrowth of Greek thought, still we have no longer any can to fight Christendom at this point. - As to the origin of the doctrine there is ~~no longer any~~ now no question to be discussed

among those who have looked into the matter. That it is a Greek and not a Hebrew idea, every competent orthodox student is now ready to admit: For the rest, we are perfectly glad that all minds which ~~have sight of the truth, shall~~ of this so choose, shall make use of the symbol of the Trinity.— In all other respects, as in these two instances, Unitarian thought is not generally sectarian, in the sense of making war upon ~~other~~ the ideas of other Christian bodies.— We see the truths at which the doctrines of the Church have aimed, However they may call us off. we feel for all branches of the Church a deep underlying sympathy; and we only desire to put in clearer form, that faith which is the common heritage of Christian souls.—

Growing out of this, another impression is distinct in my mind.— Having set out

to ~~re~~ reëxamine all the facts of the religious life, it was natural that the Unitarian movement should drift into an attitude too purely negative and critical. It is a good deal easier, at first, to say what the facts are not, than to say what they, definitely, are. But God be thanked that the movement which has been bearing us along as a people, has escaped from that desert of denial. The tone of negation is ~~fast~~ fast changing; has almost wholly changed, to a note that is strongly ~~wholly~~ positive and triumphant. That change is brought about in large measure, through the discovery of the fact of spiritual development; an unfolding of the human soul which is at once an explanation of the past, and a sure warrant of the future. All religions were formerly divided

into the true and the false; and as each man held his own faith to be true, the beliefs and the practices of the rest of mankind were called errors and superstitions. All that, with us, has become merely childish and absurd. We do not say of Buddhism, of Romanism, or of Colonism, that it is a false religion. We say that each one is a form which the growing religious consciousness has taken. Each one marks a stage of spiritual development. Men have held this belief, or adopted that rite, not because the priest is cunning and humbug is king; but because when it had come just thus far, and men so felt just thus much of God's truth, this was what it seemed right and natural for the human spirit to think and do. As the naturalist studies the lower forms of life, not to wonder at and

ridicule the clumsiness of their constructions, as
compared with the higher orders, but to trace
step by step the progress of organic growth. So
we go back into religious history not merely
to dwell upon the stupidities and superstitions
of earlier faiths, but to read the wonderful
story of the development of religious ideas, which
has accompanied the growth of knowledge and
the quickening of spiritual sensibilities. We
look forward to the future and that this
development will still go on; that the
general mind will be lifted higher and
higher; nearer the perfect vision of the greatest
souls; and that the changes of our time, however
troublesome and trying to us to-day, will
ultimately contribute to this end. This makes
our thought not only hopeful but triumphant.
The religious world as we see it is not a
wilderness of falsehoods and barbarities, but

like every province in nature, is a kingdom of order and of law; and the working together of the forces which it comprises has a definite outcome of closer continuity and higher life.- On this point we do not wish to speak as controversialists, ~~this book is for those who are ready to receive it,~~ but we are content to await that slow process of spiritual growth which can alone bring this truth home to the hearts of men.- But the movement which set out to attain a better understanding of the facts of the religious life has made another discovery, concerning which we are able to speak with ~~the~~ scientific exactness and authority; and here, while we wish to keep ourselves entirely free from every trace of — acrimonious debate, ~~spirit~~, we have something like a battle to fight for an important strategic position in the world of thought. We have discovered that

the Bible is not the perfectly written revelation of a perfect intelligence and will, but is a record of the spiritual development of a race which rose, through its typical representations, from the lowest to the highest reach of the religious consciousness.- We can prove that the common belief concerning its authorship are in many respects erroneous. We can say respecting ~~many~~ some of its teachings that they come, not directly ~~from~~ through a communication from God to the Hebrew mind, but ~~it~~ from Babylon or Persia; as surely as the archaeologist ~~archaeologist~~ can refer a monument of the past, ~~to the~~ a no matter when it is found, to the ancient civilization from which it came. There is to-day a science of biblical criticism, and its results are to some extent just as certain, and just as sure of universal acceptance at last, as those attained in any other branch of human knowledge.- We say that holding to this new

view of Bible. it is still a holy book;
because there is a Holy of Holies within the
heart of man, from whence this book proceeds
and to which it gives us entrance. — We say
that it is still the Book of books. — because
what the Greek race was in architecture,
that the Hebrew race was in religion; and its
prophets are our chief instructors on the
greatest of all themes. We say that the Bible
is still a revelation of the divine mind;
as the world about us is a declaration of
God's laws; for the soul of man is God's
creation, and the greatest soul in history
is the largest embodyment of the divine
thought and intent. — But when we read that
the Lord said unto Joshua. "Smite, kill, burn
and destroy." we know that this is not
the language of One all-holy and all-wise,
but is merely the best understanding of the

divine will to which the worlike leader of a half savage tribe, trying to do his duty in the sight of heaven, was able to attain.- We insist upon this certain fact, that the Bible was a natural outgrowth of the life of the Hebrew race, because we know that in the future religion can have nothing but a slowly decaying empire, till it is put in line with habits of thought by which the world is now to be governed. Nature is to day man's source of authority. Though a few ignorant minds may be deluded by the mormon story of the finding of a miraculously preserved manuscript, to the vast majority that story is, on the very face of it, a fraud and pretence.- They do not care even to look at the evidence, their minds being wholly set in another direction.- Whatever cannot be shown to grow naturally out of the heart of life will not win to itself attention by claiming on its behalf a special act of the divine power; but

on the other hand will be more and more distrusted in proportion as it bases itself on such a claim.- The so-called miracles of the New Testament are credible to the modern mind, if it be found that there are laws of the spirit which make such works possible in every time and place. Put forward as works done wholly outside the pale of law and order;- done this once and never to be repeated; they only discredit more and more, the narrative of which they form a part.-- It is not ~~so~~ only the right use and place of the Bible for which we are contending, though ~~of~~ we are sure that, as intelligent appreciation is every where better than slavish adulation, the future of the book is at stake on the general acceptance of facts concerning it, now known and proved.- But still more, it is on this point that we expect the main battle to be fought out between what is called naturalism and

supernaturalism; between those who think that all life is bound together by bonds of perfect order; and that man's religion is as much an outgrowth of his nature as his art or his politics, and those, on the other hand, who think that religion is wholly an exotic in the human ~~soul~~ soul, a plant of heaven, miraculously rooted ~~in the soil~~ and kept alive, in soil, otherwise wholly abandoned and depraved. And when this battle is fought, and this victory is won, (as it surely will be won), then we expect that what really Christianly achieved will be once more performed, that is to say, religion, taken from the narrow plane to which it has fallen, behind the general advance of the time in sciences and arts, and placed once more, abreast the best knowledge, the highest ideals, and the broadest truths that have been reached on other fields of investigation, will again show itself the most royal and commanding force of an advancing civilization; best able to bridge the chasms that open

between classes and nations. - most powerful to bring the lower impulses of the animal man into obedience to the higher dictates of the spirit. -

One more impression of the life that is in our churches I have in mind to try to put before you. For us it is now certain that in the best life of the future, as in the best life of the past, there will be no divorce between religion and morality. One of the questions that have arisen at this time when all things are brought in question is, whether morality may not now go on without the help of religion; whether indeed there may not be a certain gain in divesting ourselves of ethical culture, making no account of religious feelings and beliefs. - For us, that question has

been examined and answered. - However doubtful we may be on other points, with regard to this we have no hesitancy whatever. While we shall continue to affirm, as we always have affirmed, that no religion is good for anything which does not promote pure life and character, we are equally positive that the world's morality is not sufficiently based, unless it strikes its roots into religious feeling and conviction. I do not attempt here to justify this conclusion, for the grounds of it cannot be adequately stated in the few sentences that are all I can now urge upon your attention. But I affirm that this is our conclusion, - not casually arrived at, and not lightly held: but from this time forward earnest, intelligent, and a part of our deepest life. - And this means that our movement is to be more

profoundly religious. - more devoted to
the cultivation of those spiritual sentiments
and emotions which make the strength
of religion; more intimately and anxiously
concerned with those ideas that lie at
the heart of historic christianity. - There
was a time when we half suspected that
religion might be gradually fading, like
a withered leaf, and that, having served its
turn, it might at last drop wholly from
the tree of modern life, leaving the ripened
fruit of ethics in its place. We now, as
a body of people stand upon the sure
conviction that the religious nature of man
is as essential to him as his sense of
right; that belief in God, and some
experience of God's mercy and help in the
soul, are sources of good, failing which
the springs of conscience must, in time

nun dry. The promotion of spiritual worship and heartfelt piety, becomes therefore, not only our legitimate, but our chief concern; and instead of turning our back upon those holy feelings which have thrilled the hearts of christian believers in the past, we seek the means to once more awaken them in minds that are filled with all the better knowledge of our time.-

In thus setting before you these impressions of the present spiritual estate of our fellowship of churches, I do not mean to say that there is nothing there which a thoughtful critic would find amiss.- On the contrary there is much which any casual observer could wish otherwise, But none the less, the statements I have made I believe to be true, and in no degree exaggerated.- They make a spiritual movement, in which we should be glad

and proud to have our place. They show us a kind of life with which we should desire most earnestly to keep in touch, and concerning which it is well worth while - through its literature - to keep ourselves informed. We do not profess that we have attained the whole truth which we desire to know, But we have obtained enough enlightenment to justify the search which the founders of our movement began; enough to pay for all the times of doubt and trial and uncertainty we have passed through. For one thing we have learned enough to enable us to appreciate more deeply that wonder of this age, the life of Christ; to show us the utter impiety of merely calling him "Lord, Lord," and to drive us to some attempt to really do the things which he said. From this, with God's blessing, may we go on, to firmer ground and larger truth; above all to a religious sincerity, which shall qualify us to speak the truth with power to every soul of man.